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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0524
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000022

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TAGS: PGOV SOCI IN
SUBJECT: INDIAN STATE CRISIS MANAGEMENT NEEDS WORK

REF: A) KOLKATA 16, B) KOLKATA 14, C) KOLKATA 17

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Whether it is a fire that burns uncontrolled for five days, investigating explosions or containing avian influenza, recent disasters in W. Bengal highlight the poor quality of the GOWB's approach to crisis management. A lack of organization and a seeming disregard for the seriousness of these events characterizes the official response. This string of recent administrative blunders is symptomatic of the weak governance that persists in much of India at the state level.
End Summary

Eternal Flames

¶2. (SBU) On January 12, eastern India's largest wholesale garments market at Burrabazar, located in an illegal 14-story building, caught fire. It took 90 hours of firefighting to bring the blaze under control and prevent its spread to neighboring buildings. A scarcity of water, allegations of illegal construction of several stories of the building and the corruption of municipal authorities and traders, as well as protests by shop-owners against plans to demolish parts of the structure marked the chaotic response to the crisis. On January 16, Bengal Area Commander Major General Anand Mohan Verma told ConGen that Indian Army fire fighters were asked to assist in providing some equipment and command and control to the chaotic effort of putting out the flames. An added difficulty was frequent "disaster tourism" by local VIPs to the troubled area. The GOWB announced plans to form an expert committee to investigate the incident, while the Kolkata Municipal Corporation is yet to produce a final report on the fire and is planning to have structural engineers assess the building's condition.

Perpetual Investigation

¶3. (SBU) Three days later and authorities are no closer to explaining the cause of an explosion on January 16 on a main street 200 meters from the Consulate (reftel A). The gas and electric companies have completed their digging around to locate possible accidental causes but have found no evidence of leaks or faulty wiring. The police are now suggesting methane from the sewers as a possible cause of the explosion. Post's FSN-I went to the scene after local police departed and did itemizer swipes (explosive material detection) on the tree and railings affected by the explosion. All came back negative for compounds in the standard itemizer scan. The West Bengal Police (WBP)

bomb squad also had negative results with their "sniffer" (both canine and electronic) and they have ruled out a bomb as the cause of the explosion.

¶4. (SBU) Jurisdictional responsibility for investigating the explosion is complicating matters. The WBP was given initial jurisdiction and they were not receptive to any outside offers of investigative assistance. According to the WB Criminal Investigations Department (CID) the Kolkata Police (KP) now has been given lead authority on the investigation.

Bird Flu Fallout

¶5. (SBU) AI: As described in reftels B and C, the GOWB response to the Avian Influenza outbreak in the state has been inadequate. Culling operations targeted at 350,000 birds has so far only culled 25,000. GOWB officials took nearly 10 days to realize that dead birds needed to be tested for the H5N1 virus and not some other disease. Public awareness campaigns about AI, if they were conducted at all, have been ineffective as villagers have smuggled birds away from affected areas and loiter around dead birds in the infected zones. Post is continuing to send in daily reports, as it appears the AI is spreading in the state.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Poor inter-departmental coordination, a plodding chain of command, and a default tendency to deflect responsibility characterize the GOWB officials' approach to crisis. While India is heralded as a rising commercial and international power, a week of bungles and snafus by state officials in West Bengal is a strong reminder of the limited institutional capacities of many Indian state governments. The GOWB's limitations are not unique. Other states in India's eastern region are equally challenged in providing government

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services - the GOWB only seems less fortunate in having a series of very public embarrassments in such a short period of time.
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